

# Green Thumb, Caring Heart

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Hayes Jackson has 2 passions in life- raising plants and helping people. He combines both passions in his job as an Extension urban horticulture agent. He uses his encyclopedic knowledge of plants not only to enrich the social and cultural life of his community, but also to broaden the scope and aspirations of a group of disadvantaged teenage girls at the Coosa Valley Youth Attention Center in Anniston.

He does it with a greenhouse built years ago by the Calhoun County Extension Office and local Master Gardeners to provide the girls with horticultural therapy - a way to help free them of the psychological baggage of their past. Working with a group of dedicated Master Gardeners, Jackson uses the greenhouse's resources to teach the girls horticultural skills. Plants grown and propagated at the greenhouse have been used to establish other demonstration gardens throughout the county. Proceeds from plant sales are used to support the program.



Using grants from regional nurseries and donations from the Birmingham Botanical Garden, Jackson also has traveled to remote parts of the world, finding plants that can be adapted to Alabama conditions and grown in the Anniston greenhouse. This, too, has enriched in diverse ways the lives of the girls and the wider community as well. For the girls, the trips have provided effective hands-on geography lessons. Throughout his journeys, Jackson communicates with them via email, while they map his stop-overs. The specimens he brings back are first quarantined then they are propagated by the girls, and sold, adding to the beauty and diversity of southeastern landscapes.

Master Gardener Susie Franklin, a long time greenhouse volunteer, has often been amazed at the changes the project brings to the girls, many of whom initially show little, if any, interest in gardening. "They start out unhappy working in the dirt and fertilizing, but before they leave, they are eager to do just about anything". The girls have been inspired. Two of them have gone to the University of Georgia and Jacksonville State University to pursue degrees in horticulture-related fields.

With plants propagated at the greenhouse, Jackson has equipped the Anniston Museum of Natural History and the adjoining Berman Museum with tropical, native, xeriscaped, and dry-shade gardens. "We are now known for our gardens, and we have a lot of people who come specifically to see the gardens and adjoining grounds", says Cheryl Bragg, the Museum's executive director. The gardens were also one of the recommended stops on Alabama's 2004 Year of the Gardens celebration.



Anniston Museum of Natural History

Jackson is someone whose avocation and vocation have intersected to form a life mission. He readily admits that even if he won the million dollar lottery, he would still be doing what he's doing now.